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Notes on Sontag is a frank, witty, and entertaining reflection on the work, influence, and personality of one of the "foremost interpreters of . . . our recent contemporary moment." Adopting Sontag's favorite form, a set of brief essays or notes that circle around a topic from different perspectives, renowned essayist Phillip Lopate considers the achievements and limitations of his tantalizing, daunting subject through what is fundamentally a conversation between two writers. Reactions to Sontag tend to be polarized, but Lopate's account of Sontag's significance to him and to the culture over which she loomed is neither hagiography nor hatchet job. Despite admiring and being inspired by her essays, he admits a persistent ambivalence about Sontag. Lopate also describes the figure she cut in person through a series of wry personal anecdotes of his encounters with her over the years.

Setting out from middle-class California to invent herself as a European-style intellectual, Sontag raised the bar of critical discourse and offered up a model of a freethinking, imaginative, and sensual woman. But while crediting her successes, Lopate also looks at how her taste for aphorism and the radical high ground led her into exaggerations that could do violence to her own common sense, and how her ambition to be seen primarily as a novelist made her undervalue her brilliant essays. Honest yet sympathetic, Lopate's engaging evaluation reveals a Sontag who was both an original and very much a person of her time.